

Likes and views: Investigating internet video content creators perceptions of popularity

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1. Introduction

The online environment encourages digital natives to participate in various forms of collaborative and productive efforts through their use of social media and digital services such as Facebook, Wikipedia, Instagram and YouTube. These type of activities have turned the consumer of online media content and channels into a social prosumers (Fuchs, 2014; Ritzer 2010, 2015), which is particularly evident in the prosumption activities of social video content.

Social video content is generated by private individuals and distributed to social networks through commercial services such as YouTube, Twitch and Facebook live. The rapid developed of supporting technologies (live-streaming, VR video formats, short video “story” integrations), dissemination platforms and even monetisation services (subscriptions, partnership programmes, donations) related to the creation of video content, have made this activity more approachable and available for the general public. Additionally, the emergence of online video influencers and celebrities such as PewDiePie and Zoella, has increased the allure of online fame and fortune, associated with social video content creation. The increase in the popularity of this activity has led to greater competition for the attention of the online audiences and their engagement with content

Social video content creation revolves around a complicated set of new economic structures that combine both play and labour, playbour (Kücklich, 2005; Castronova, 2005; Lehtovirta & Castronova, 2014), the platform economy, where the platforms facilitates content distribution as well as monetization structures and human interaction (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), and the attention economy, where the attention of the viewers acts as a form of payment for the creators of content (Simon, 1971; Huberman, 2009, 2013).

The attention economy has played a crucial part in the formation of economic value in digital media formats and popularity. The idea of the attention economy evolved from a simple notion, that attention itself is a commodity. This idea was first introduced before the emergence of digital consumer technology, to examine the economics of the increasingly information-rich world (Simon, 1971), but developed into an accurate economic structure for the digital environments that depend on the abundance of content and information and the scarcity of attention (Huberman, 2013).

The different aspects of popularity and the attention economy in digital realms have been studied through various different forms of social media formats. For example, studies related to Facebook, have examined the content posted on Facebook and its effects on popularity (Goodwin, Griffin, Lyons, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2016) and the “like economy” of Facebook, that exemplifies how technology, through buttons and interactions, can transform our social interactions into transactions (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Whereas previous research related to YouTube has examined the elements of attention on YouTube (García-Rapp, 2016) and how negative emotions are associated with the attention economy of YouTube (Berryman & Kwaka, 2017).

This research will examine the aspects of popularity of social video content creators through an online survey (N=385). The research will analyse and evaluate which aspects of content creation, content creators perceive to be most valuable towards their popularity, and which of those aspects they place most effort in.

2. Methods

This research examines the popularity of social video content creators, by determining what content creators themselves perceive to have an effect on their popularity, and how much effort they place on these aspects within their content creation activities. The respondents were presented with eighteen predetermined elements related to different aspects of social video content creation, that were considered to emphasise the content or the content creator to their viewers. These aspects of social video content creation were selected based on seven preliminary semi-structured interviews with different types of content creators, and through observation of different content creators and dissemination channels in digital environments.

The data for this research was collected through an online survey, which was distributed through various social media outlets (Facebook, Reddit, Twitch) and through an email contact list to social video content creators globally. The data was collected during 2017 from 385 social video content creators, out of whom a majority were young adults (millennials/Generation Y). More demographic information presented in Table 1. The respondents were asked two different questions related to the selected aspects of popularity: “Please rate how important you estimate the following things are in regards to the popularity of the videos you share online?” and “How much effort do you put in the following things when producing and sharing videos online?”. Respondents then rated each aspect on a 7-point Likert scale (1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree”), which was used to determine the means for each aspect of popularity for the analysis of this research.

Table 1. Demographic information of respondents.

		N	%			N	%
Gender	Male	280	73.8%	Employment	Part-time	51	13.2%
	Female	92	24.9%		Full-time	129	33.8%

	Other	5	1.3%	Student	131	35.6%
				Unemployed	61	16.1%
Age	<17	33	8.8%	Retired	5	1.3%
	18-24	160	43.1%			
	24-34	126	33.0%			
	35-44	37	9.6%			
	44>	21	5.4%			

3. Results

The results, presented in Table 2, indicate that content producers place importance in entertainment value, interaction and communication, personality, originality and activity level to a greater extent ($M > 5$), and to a smaller extent related to the topic of videos, technical skills, search optimization, technical equipment, profile appearance, skill of the host and sharing personal experiences ($5 > M > 4$). Content producers felt networking with other producers, offline presence and agents to be of less important ($4 > M > 3$), and even less so with props, special guests and sex appeal ($3 > M$). In regards to effort, content producers placed greater effort in entertainment value, interaction and communication, personality, originality, technical skills and topic of videos ($M > 5$). They placed slightly less effort on activity level, search optimization, technical equipment, profile look, skill of the host and sharing personal experiences ($5 > M > 4$). Less effort was placed on networking with other producers and offline presence ($4 > M > 3$), and least effort content producers reported for agents, props, special guests and sex appeal ($3 > M$).

Table 2. Descriptive means and standard deviations for perceived importance and effort.

	Aspects of popularity	Description	Importance		Effort	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Entertainment value of the videos	How enjoyable or fun the content is	5.65	1.231	5.5	1.401
2	Interaction and communication with audience	Direct communication with the audience through comments, chats etc. Primarily non-promotional and community enhancing.	5.55	1.494	5.5	1.689
3	Your personality as the host of the videos	The personality traits portrayed or enhanced within the video	5.33	1.554	5.15	1.783
4	Originality	Originality of the video content	5.08	1.492	5.04	1.672
5	Activity levels/frequency of posting	How often content is published	5.01	1.601	4.64	1.94
6	The typical topic of the videos you share	The typical topic of video content	4.96	1.532	5	1.705
7	Technical skills	Technical skills of the content creator related to video production (e.g. editing skills)	4.89	1.502	5.09	1.727

8	Search optimization	Search optimization related to the created social video content	4.85	1.724	4.27	1.989
9	Technical equipment	Technical equipment utilized in the production and distribution of videos	4.69	1.467	4.66	1.758
10	Your profile look	The visual and communicative effect of the profile of a content creator (related to video content creation activities)	4.35	1.656	4.47	1.871
11	Level/skill of the host	Level of skill of the content creator in their preferred topic/activity presented in their videos (e.g. gaming)	4.2	1.601	4.6	1.748
12	Sharing personal experiences and information	Sharing information and experiences that are considered personal to the content creator (e.g. depression/anxiety).	4.05	1.709	4.1	1.911
13	Network with other streamers and vloggers	Communication and relationships with other content creators	3.9	1.8	3.23	1.952
14	Offline presence	Activities outside the digital environments related to social video content creation (e.g. public appearances and events)	3.52	1.689	3.47	1.855
15	Agents/influencer network (representatives that provide you with opportunities etc.)	Working with promotional networks or representatives who provide further commercial opportunities and development related to social video content creation.	3.03	1.75	2.47	1.806
16	Props in the videos	Additional props in the videos.	2.93	1.692	2.77	1.827
17	Special guests	Special guests in the videos.	2.69	1.625	2.19	1.626
18	Sex appeal of the host of the videos	The physical appearance of the content creator themselves.	2.59	1.731	2.35	1.691

4. Discussion

The personality of the host was reported to be an important contributor to popularity. Content creators also reported that they made a conscious effort in depicting their persona as well as their domain specific skills in their content creation activities. The host of social video content is often central to the content of the video and visible throughout, especially in popular genres such as gaming and beauty. Content creators have been found to utilize their content to construct a branded-self (Senft, 2013) and a micro-celebrity status (Marwick, 2015), through which these individuals position themselves as consumable public figures in the eyes of the online audiences. As micro-celebrities, the content creators may reflect a level of relatability to their audiences, but also have an influence on those audiences as “authority” figures, which then again feeds into the larger sphere of the attention economy through elements of promotion.

The importance of the personality of the content creator is often also highlighted in the tone and mood of the social video. This is especially highlighted in the development of a “happiness economy” where the content that portrays favorable, positive, moods and personalities is perceived more favorably, and therefore also gains more attention and popularity. This has been discussed by the popular social video content creator, Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie) in his “Forced Positivity on YouTube” video (Kjellberg, 2017). However, there has been an increase in subgenres and type of content that reinforces negative associations and moods, through either encouraging criticism (eg. bad gameplay videos) or supporting negatively associated moods, such as anxiety, sadness or even anger (Berryman & Kwaka, 2017).

The content itself is another crucial part of the attention economy, which has been highlighted in previous research on spectating social video content (Sjöblom, Törhönen, Hamari & Macey 2017, Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017, Hamilton, 2014). The topic of the content, combined with search optimization, increases the visibility of the content creator and their content, whereas entertainment value and originality of content allow for further engagement and consistency of audiences and feeds into the self-branding of the content creator. It should be noted, that although search optimization was considered to be important for the popularity of the content creator, the effort placed on it was not as highly rated. This may be related to the difficulty in managing search optimization efforts, or evaluating its real effects on popularity.

The topic and originality of content may also allow for further development of communities around the content creator or their content. Community aspect is highlighted in our findings, as the importance of the activity level/frequency of posts of the content creator, and their interaction with the viewers. Maintaining an engaged community is imperative in the attention economy, as the amount of available content continuously grows and competes for the same viewers. The community of a content creator requires continuous interaction with the content creator themselves in order to maintain said community and audience. Interaction on digital services, especially, allows for the illusion of a more intimate relationship with a public figure, which is one of the main differences between online celebrity and digital micro-celebrity (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Through interaction and frequent content, the content creator maintains a reoccurring viewer base, which for example in Twitch, is one of the biggest requirements for levelling up in their achievement system. The findings of our study, however, also indicate that content creators do not place great effort on aspects such as a networking with other content creators and their offline presence, which seems to indicate that the focus of effort is on the community of viewers and the active content creation.

Although there is great emphasis on the content of video as well as the content creator and their community, the technical skills of a content creator and their equipment also seem to have a significant importance on the perceived popularity of the content creator. This may highlight the growing standards of quality of digital video content. Viewers of social video content are increasingly expecting the video to be of high quality. The accessibility of editing software and filters, as well as the development of social video sharing services and platforms, have also increased these expectations, as well as the level of technical skills of content creators.

Our findings also indicated a few aspects that were perceived to have a low impact on the popularity of a content creator. Out of these aspects, the most surprising was the sex appeal of the content creator. Sex appeal, as a controversial topic, has been a subject of ongoing discussion related to using sex appeal to gain more concurrent viewers and popularity in social video content creation. This discussion has resulted in increased platform enforced regulations related to sexual content

and sex appeal such as the dress code enforced by Twitch (Twitch, 2018). These discussions have been especially focused on female streamers and their behavior and popularity on social video sharing platforms. Due to this discussion, there has been an ongoing effort to improve the standards of social video content on popular services, which may also be reflected in the findings of this study. This finding reveals an interesting aspect of social video sharing related to the perception of sexualisation and sexual appeal in content creation, that could be examined in future research.

The final element to have a relatively low impact in our findings is the importance of third-party agents and networks on the popularity of social video content. This aspect of social video content creation is relatively new and represents a new economic layer in social video content creation. Not only is this a novel element in social video creation, it also represents a certain type of professionalised aspect of the activity that may not be relevant for those content creators who consider this a leisure activity. These types of partnerships commonly require the content creator to already have a certain level of popularity, in order for them to become more relevant in their activities.

This research presents an overview of the aspects of popularity of social video content creation. We acknowledge that these aspects are based on a relatively narrow interpretation of the activity, which we aimed to address by interviewing different types of content creators before generating these categories of popularity. The research aims to address an emerging issue in content creation. As the tools to generate content become more accessible, the amount of available content grows. This leads to an oversupply of content, which will require developed skills of media literacy to interpret and evaluate. Assessing the different aspects of popularity, does not only provide content creators the tools to approach content creation, but also allows for media organisations to evaluate their approach to content and information creation and dissemination in this looming era of the "infocalypse" (Warzel, 2018) .

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